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ADVERTISING IN THE ENGLISH CLASS

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Most English teachers who piously attend conventions, and who read with regularity various pedagogical magazines, are ready to bolt at the mere mention of a novel idea for enriching the English course. We have so much to do already, such a bewildering mass of material at our disposal, such an enormous task confronting us in the development of fundamental habits of thought and speech, that some justification exists for a skeptical attitude toward the projects of innovating theorists. Most of us, I venture to say, are not wildly enthusiastic over the "instructive movies," nor do we find ourselves impelled to substitute the current magazines for the more or less traditional reading of the classics. We may be willing to admit that the *Argosy* has a punch that *Silas Marner* lacks, and yet not be ready to discard George Eliot's simple story for feverish adventures from the pen of Robert Chambers.

At the same time even so caustic a critic of present-day English as Professor Judd grants that we are eager to utilize any new suggestion; that as a class we are the most progressive and the most radical of all teachers in secondary schools. That does not prevent us, he bitterly adds, from being perhaps the most ineffective.

However that may be, I wish to make it plain at the outset that I approach the subject of advertising from the point of view of the English teacher—one primarily interested in training pupils first to think and then to express the thought clearly. Obviously there are several vantage points from which one can regard the field of advertising. The psychologist finds in it a fascinating study of the practical application of the laws of attention, association, and suggestion. The business man is forced to be interested in advertising because he recognizes it as the greatest sales agent of modern commerce. But he is interested in such problems as the relation between distribution and advertising, the choice of the

best mediums, the amount of money to be spent in proportion to profits, the administration of his campaign, and the testing of results. There is an army of others who have special interests in this activity: artists, designers, printers, engravers, efficiency experts, and pure-food inspectors.

When we proudly inform visitors, therefore, that at the High School of Commerce advertising is taught, we are hardly telling the truth. The subject is too vast—has too many branches. On the theoretical side it is still in the unripe stage, though on a somewhat sounder basis than the science of educational measurement. Much advantage, it is true, has been derived from investigations into the problem of finding effective colors, shapes, and positions of advertising illustration. Nevertheless, up to the present no large body of teaching has been built up with regard to the theory of advertising. In general the books on this phase of the subject are distinguished either by a hazy enthusiasm or by a wealth of statistics on matters of controversy. When we come to the specific relations between the art of advertising and business, we find that each situation, in order to be adequately understood, requires an intimate acquaintance with innumerable details. We must know the product advertised, its rivals, the form of distribution, the ultimate consumer, the margin of utility in advertising. For example, the Curtis Publishing Company for years has been attempting to induce the great manufacturers of textiles to advertise extensively. In order to present its case in convincing fashion, it has thoroughly investigated the marketing of textiles from the factory to the consumer and has incorporated the results of its investigation in a series of bulky volumes.

In view, then, of the vagueness of one side of this subject and the intricacy of the other, you will not be surprised that we make no high pretensions to the teaching of advertising in the High School of Commerce. We merely scratch the surface. Our efforts are very humble, and perhaps our achievement even more so.

Still, something worth while, I think, can be accomplished. Before planning our work in detail, however, several momentous questions had to be faced and at least tentatively answered. In the first place, what is our purpose in teaching advertising? Then,

what material shall we select appropriate to our aim? Finally, by what methods shall we make our teaching effective? I shall try to show, very briefly, how we have answered these questions.

Inasmuch as we send boys out into the business world prepared to earn their living, we feel that they cannot be said to be on speaking terms with commercial life unless they have some understanding of the influence of advertising and the methods by which that influence is gained. We justify the course in advertising, primarily, on the ground that it is a necessary element in the preparation for a business career. Moreover, the multifarious occupations concerned in this field offer a splendid opportunity for a livelihood to boys of certain talents; therefore we should be derelict in our duty if we failed to give pupils the chance to discover themselves, to find out whether they are attracted to advertising as a vocation. As a matter of fact, I know several boys who became interested in this field through their study of it in school and who are now working in the offices of publicity firms in this city. One of them last year offered as evidence of his ability several pieces of work which he had done as class assignments and obtained a very promising position on the strength of that evidence.

Similar considerations would, of course, have no weight in schools of a more general type where no attempt is made to create an atmosphere of business thinking. Yet even in college preparatory schools a limited amount of attention to advertising might fruitfully be given in the teaching of English composition, for the basic principles of structure are the same in both cases. The best advertisement must have a single message just as well as the theme. Imagine a poster advertising Heinz's beans and bearing several illustrations which portray such diverse qualities as cleanliness of manufacture, succulence of taste, ease of preparation, variety of use, and high percentage of nutriment. Clearly such a poster has as much singleness of aim as the ordinary Freshman theme on a trip to Revere Beach. Compare the confused impression you get from the Heinz poster with the intense and unified vividness of most of the Omega Oil advertisements. One I recall particularly. On a black background is displayed in large white letters the caption, "Omega Oil—Relieves Pain." To the right is the picture of

a lady; she is holding her hand to her forehead and, judging by her facial expression, is groaning with pain. A little girl, evidently her daughter, is stretching toward her a bottle of Omega Oil. The look of supreme confidence on the girl's face makes us, too, feel that her mother's suffering will soon be alleviated.

Thousands of advertisements can be utilized in this way to force upon the pupil's reluctant mind, not only the real significance of "unity," but also its utter necessity in all types of expression. Naturally we are in no danger of confining ourselves to examples from the domain of advertising. That would be the culmination of stupidity. But just because the methods of advertising are broader, more striking, and, if you will, cruder, than the methods of ordinary expression, for that very reason I believe that illustrations drawn from this province are likely to make impressions more comprehensible, clear-cut, and lasting.

It would be easy to indicate how, in like manner, other essential qualities of composition can be exemplified from the back pages of magazines, from billboards, and from street-car posters. Successful advertisements, as anyone can see, are constructed with an eye to proper emphasis; to an equal degree they are simple, clear, coherent, and sincere in tone. I have not the space to develop more fully the possibilities of correlation between advertising and the principles of composition, but shall have to confine myself to the mere suggestion that much material can be drawn from this source to make the teaching of composition more human as well as more concrete.

Even in our attempts to teach advertising on account of its commercial importance we keep our eyes fixed steadily upon its aspect as a form of expression. The students enrolled in the merchandising course have the added opportunity of becoming familiar with the more technical apparatus of the advertiser and the actual problems that confront the business man in administering this side of his business in the most economical way. But in the English classes our aim is more restricted. To put the matter briefly, we first present in simple form the psychological principles which underlie advertising; and, secondly, we lead the students to apply these principles in selecting, criticizing, and writing advertisements.

The amount of psychology taught can be outlined in a few words. At the outset advertising is defined as the art of attracting attention to a product in such a way that the public is impelled to buy. To attract attention is not enough—any clown can do that. The advertiser must do three things in his publicity campaign: (1) attract attention, (2) arouse a desire to own, and (3) intensify that desire to the action of buying. He has, therefore, to find out what makes people take notice of things; then, having gained their attention, he must associate the idea of his product with feelings of pleasure and satisfaction; and, finally, he must suggest strongly the acquisition of his product at the earliest opportunity. Obviously, then, it is necessary to study the laws of attention, association, and suggestion. This we do, making clear at every point the express relation between the principle studied and its application to advertising.

We spend, perhaps, the greater part of the time allowed in considering the ways by which attention is secured. The pupils learn partly by their own investigations and partly by direct suggestions *ex cathedra* that an object evokes our attention by grace of several favoring circumstances: (1) by not having to compete with other things, (2) by intensity of sensation, (3) by repetition, (4) by being easily understood, and (5) by arousing emotion.

Suppose, for the sake of a definite illustration, that we are trying to develop an understanding of the value of intensity of sensation. The pupils perhaps are instructed to glance through the back pages of a magazine and to pick out three or four advertisements that immediately aroused curiosity. The individual student, when called upon, displays one of his selections and tells what there was about it which made it have a more cogent appeal than its companions. The class then has an opportunity of criticizing both the selection and the defense; and frequently in such hand-to-hand combats very sensible things are said, which show that the boys have done independent thinking in this direction. Many assignments of like nature suggest themselves at once. The teacher, for example, may ask each boy to cut out the theater advertisement that seems most striking to him in the columns of

the *Boston Post*, or to select the most effective poster in the street car as he comes to school. This last assignment gives a splendid chance for a practical and interesting combination of description, exposition, and argument. In discussions of this kind a great many questions are asked that put the teacher on his mettle; the wise instructor will relinquish any assumption of omniscience, if he ever took such an unfortunate attitude.

By this procedure it does not take long to discover the salient facts with regard to intensity of sensation. Light, size, color, movement, contrast, are seen to be the important qualities that make sensations more intense and therefore more likely to arrest attention. These qualities once firmly grasped, advertisements of different kinds, some good, some poor, are put before the class. At times the class is asked to write a critical paragraph such as the editor of *Printer's Ink* might write; these criticisms are read aloud and are themselves subjected to attack from the points of view both of good advertising and of good English. At other times the criticism takes the form of oral discussion.

The most stimulating part of the study, however, both to teacher and to pupil, is the actual writing of advertisements. In making up copy the pupil must be ready to state for what kind of public he is writing and in what class of medium the work might conceivably appear. He is not expected to draw illustrations, though some prefer to attempt this; but he must indicate the position and nature of the illustration in considerable detail. At first the efforts are consciously imitative. For example, the boys may be directed to observe the *Cream of Wheat* advertisements; the repetition of the trade illustration, the "chef," in varied surroundings and telling a different story; the simplicity and suggestiveness of the brief text in each instance. The task of the students, then, is to invent a novel situation for the ingratiating cook and to supply a suitable arrangement and text.

From assignments involving deliberate imitation, together with some element of novelty or originality, we proceed to increase gradually the strain on the students' creative powers. In one class, for instance, samples of different kinds of crackers were passed around, and each student was directed to write a full-page

advertisement that would make the public want to taste his particular cracker. As a matter of fact, the papers submitted by the boys were sent to the hospitable manufacturers, who made use of several suggestions drawn therefrom. One essential in this kind of work, I think, hardly needs to be emphasized. The pupils must be familiar with the product they are asked to write about; otherwise, of course, it is impossible for them to choose the most distinctive or the most appealing element to form the central fact of their advertisement. In connection with this idea it may be intimated that food and athletic supplies are not without a certain interest for boys.

The practice in applying advertising psychology is by no means confined to such formal types as magazine or poster display. The whole course in business correspondence is based upon the cardinal principle that every letter sent out by a firm is an advertisement, not merely in its mechanical form, but even more in its matter and tone. It is easy to see the truth of this statement in the case of sales letters and follow-up literature; but once you come to realize the immense importance of that rather intangible thing called mood or attitude on the part of a firm's customers, you cannot help perceiving the advertising potentiality of all correspondence—form letters, bills, acknowledgments, letters of collection, and even orders.

In fact, to my mind the most valuable and most thoroughly practical contribution of our work in advertising consists in the application of its fundamental principles to the writing of business letters. Most teachers of English, I think, dislike to teach business writing. They find it dry, formal, uninspiring. Once grasp the thought, however, that every letter has the magic character of suggestion, for good or for evil; that the field for the exercise of imagination in business is as wide as the land of dreams and infinitely more remunerative; grasp this thought and the teaching of letter writing acquires a positive fascination. When we come to see that a good sales letter is almost as difficult to write as a sonnet, we shall do less complaining about the irksome routine of "Business English."